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ABSTRACT

This information sheet provides a summary of general observations regarding adult learners. Adults from different walks of life may seek out learning at different times in their lives, for different reasons, and for vastly different purposes. Adult learning groups may include students of different ages, cultures, and educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Adult education is provided in diverse settings for diverse purposes: from community education classes to workplace training. Adults seek out learning situations for various reasons, including the following: to achieve a predetermined goal; to fill a gap in education; to explore options and make choices; and for personal development, family, social, or community reasons. Teachers/trainers in adult education programs must become familiar with some of the general theories related to adult learning processes and must recognize and accommodate the reciprocal relationships between teaching and learning. A range of theories of adult education and learning exist along with a corresponding range of teaching methodologies, such as the following: traditional (teacher as expert); self-actualization (facilitated problem solving); humanist (teacher stimulates and suggests); revolutionary (teachers and learners are equal participants); and organizational effectiveness (curriculum is determined by organizational needs). Most adults have a preferred learning style. Adults may be primarily active, reflective, theorizing, or experiential learners. Motivation is critical to adult learning. Also included are a number of reerences for readers requiring further information. (13 references) (MN)

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Adult Learning
ARIS Information Sheet

September 1999

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Adult Learning

This information sheet will provide readers interested in formalising or developing adult learning opportunities within their community or workplace etc. a summary of some information relating to the field of adult learners, adult learning and teaching methods for adult education programs.

Also included are a number of useful references for readers requiring further information, or a broader picture of the issues involved.

For individuals or organisations involved in the development and provision of education and training - in any of its many forms, there is a responsibility to ensure that the learning needs of the participants are considered and catered for. This is no simple task, as the characteristics of adult learners and the issues encapsulated in the study of adult learning, are as complex as the learners themselves.

There is no such thing as a typical adult learner. Adults from differing walks of life may seek out learning at different times in their life, for different reasons, and for vastly different purposes. Students of different ages, cultures and educational and socioeconomic backgrounds may make up an adult learning group.

Setting the scene

Many of the issues discussed in this information sheet, can be applied to a range of adult learning situations, be they one to one, large or small group settings, formal or informal learning situations.

Adult education is provided in a range of settings for a variety of purposes: from community education classes to workplace training. (The learning courses outlined here, may be known by different names in different settings.)

ARIS Information sheets are produced by ARIS, the Adult Education Resource and Information Service, Language Australia.

A full listing of resources and journal articles on Adult Literacy can be obtained by contacting ARIS.

All resources and readings listed are held by ARIS and are recorded on our databases. ARIS databases can be accessed on-line through the ARIS homepage:
http://sunsite.anu.edu.au/language-australia/aris

Some kinds of adult learning courses are:

Adult Literacy and Basic Education (ALBE) - courses are designed to enable adults to learn to read and write or to fill in gaps in their basic education, possibly for early school leavers.

Further Education (FE) is a term often used to describe general education classes which pay attention to foundational skills such as language, literacy and numeracy (LL&N) and preparation for and pathways to other educational programs.

English as a Second Language (ESL) - courses designed for speakers of languages other than English.

- English for Occupational Purposes
- English for Further Study etc.

Return to Study - courses designed for adults who have been away from formal schooling for some time who want to learn or brush up on study skills.

Victorian Certificate of Education (Adult VCE)

Vocational Education and Training (VET) - courses designed to develop a person's capability for a prospective career or occupation, to improve practice within an existing employment placement or to enable job promotion.

- Workplace Education
- Employment Preparation

Higher/Tertiary Education - specific TAFE or University courses.

General adult education - a range of special interest short courses learn a particular set of skills for a specific purpose. Eg leadlighting, martial arts, computers etc.

Course length, structure and content may be influenced by funding considerations and/or the administrative requirements of a particular course however, when possible learning programs/courses should be designed to cater for the needs of the unique groups and individuals undertaking the learning program.

Reasons for returning to study

Adults seek out learning situations for a variety of reasons. Some of these are:

- to achieve a pre-determined goal
- to fill a gap in education
- to explore options and make choices
- for personal development, family, social or community reasons

- to perform a specific role or job better
- to enhance their employment prospects
- for the fun of it

(see also the section on motivation and learning)

Students may enrol in a program or class expressing their goal in known or concrete terms,

eg. 'I want to do spelling,'

'I want to learn to make a mud brick house.'

These are legitimate goals in themselves, but there may be more the student wants to learn but is unable to express in known terms.

Depending on the type of course required and the learner's expression of need? it may be very useful to conduct a pre-placement interview with the student, to clarify the student's objectives, and provide the learning program most suitable to their needs and expectations. In certain instances, students find that a particular course is not really what they were looking for and may need a referral to another course. Some students wish to extend their study experience and explore pathways to other areas of study not initially planned.

The nature of adult learning

It is worthwhile at this point to examine some of the general theories relating to adult learning processes. Teacher/trainers in adult education programs must recognise and accommodate the reciprocal relationship(s) between teaching and learning:

"Teaching is concerned with the promotion of learning, and we therefore need to understand what it is we are promoting. In particular, part of our task is to help our adult participants 'learn how to learn', or rather to learn how to learn more effectively." (Rogers A. 1996)

There are a number of widening debates about the nature of learning, and particularly the distinctions drawn between learners of different ages, or at different stages in their lives; eg. primary, secondary education, second chance or higher education. Within each of these branches of education, teachers may use some of the same techniques at particular points in time, but generally the basic approaches undertaken can be seen as fundamentally different.

What is learning?

What follows is not a definitive outline of all the issues and aspects of learning and all its forms, but more a review of some of the more common understandings of how 'adult learning' is considered.

Regardless of the setting, be it in the workplace, at home, by flexible delivery, or in a community centre, those responsible for the development of adult education programs need to be aware of the broader principles and understandings related to adult learning.

There are multiple meanings of the term 'learning'. In years passed, it was closely associated with memorising:

'You must **learn** your times tables.'

Other meanings of learning relate to the transformation or change in knowledge and behaviour. These types of changes can be instinctive /automatic/ involuntary

'I **learned** not to touch the pot handle when its on the cooker.'

And one can be transformed by learning through 'self motivation and effort'

'After three mornings of skiing lessons, I **learned** how to stop!'

Many assumptions about learning relate to the receipt of skills and knowledge, but in fact, research has broadened our understandings to show that learning:

- is a voluntary, and active process
- is individual
- is an internal process
- has intrinsic value as a process, itself

Learning takes place in a range of spheres, there has been a good deal of academic research that illuminate the different ways in which learning can be described ie: knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, behaviour.

When does learning take place?

It is important that learning not be too narrowly considered as something that takes place solely within the confines of an educational institution, in fact many of our most important and life changing learning experiences occur well beyond the formal educational experience. It is important in that sense, to make a distinction between 'learning' and 'education'.

Three conditions are required for learning to occur:

- raw data and experiences required
- time and freedom from threat
- sufficient prior meaning or perspectives to handle new information.

"Learning results in relatively permanent changes not only in meaning and behaviours but also in the ways one goes about making meaning, thinking, making choices, acting and ultimately making sense." (MacKeracher, 1996:6)

Learning to learn

'Learning to learn' is a term increasingly used to describe a process whereby a learner's independence and autonomy in learning increases over time. Effective adult learning programs attend to the development of 'learning to learn' skills, by enabling learners to consider the **processes** of effective learning in addition to the **content**.

'Learning to learn' or learning about learning activities lead to:

- an improved generic skills base
- increased development in self directed or autonomous learning
- greater and/or more effective selection of, and use of resources
- increased opportunity to engage in critical and reflective practice
- greater opportunity to exercise interpersonal communicative skills through networking and collaboration
- enhanced organisational practice.

Teaching methodologies in adult education

A range of teaching methodologies commonly described in the field of adult education can be found in Foley (1995:12). Each of these methodologies are underpinned by particular values and beliefs about adult learning, learning styles and the role of the teacher and her/his educational philosophy. There are a number of theorists who are accepted as representative of each teaching methodology:

THEORY	TEACHING	LEARNING
traditional (Paterson, Lawson)	teacher as expert	student passively receives information
self actualisation (Rogers, Knowles)	facilitated problem solving	students decide what to learn
humanist (Dewey, Lindeman)	teacher stimulates & suggests	agreed learning projects/contracts individual freedom
revolutionary (Freire, Horton)	equal participant	equal participant reflection and action through ongoing collaboration and dialogue
organisational effectiveness (Argyris, Schon)	curriculum determined by organisational needs	various techniques outcomes assessed in terms of objectives met - eg: CBT

Many learners and teachers and program trainers may be familiar with more traditional teaching methodologies from their experiences in formal education programs as children or young adults. In many instances, this approach is not suitable or desirable. As adult learners there are marked differences in the ways we learn compared to when we were children. We have a great deal of experience and knowledge, intellectually there are many changes in the ways we receive, process and retain information . Consequently, adult education programs today focus on more **active and democratic** approaches to teaching and learning.

This list is not definitive, indeed teachers are becoming more sophisticated in adopting and adapting certain approaches to delivery, according to the learning styles of the students and the content to be taught.

Learning styles

"Learning style is sometimes defined as the characteristic cognitive, affective, social and physiological behaviours that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment ." (Keefe in MacKeracher 1996:196)

General understandings about learning styles:

- All adults have unique or preferred strategies for learning and/or processing information, these preferred strategies are closely linked to their experience, personality traits and levels of ability
- All groups of adult learners will be diverse in nature
- Each adult within a group will be a complex mix of learning styles and abilities
- Learning styles are (or should be) value neutral.

Preferred learning styles

Individuals rarely fit neatly into any one category or classified type. Nevertheless, it may be useful to consider ways in which adult learners may approach or handle a learning episode at a particular point in time.

The active learner: independent, often adopting forms of 'trial and error', receptive to new ideas and experiences, often prepared to propose solutions that may not always be fully formed.

The reflective learner: more cautious, often building on the observation of, and sharing opinions with others -taking time to build a broader picture.

The theorising learner: builds up systems or principles of knowledge - work through problems step by step, attaching the unknown to the known, following logical steps - prefers the 'cut and dried', not positive about diverse opinions.

The experiential learner: like to do for themselves, find shortcuts and become frustrated with too much instruction without opportunity for action.

Motivation and learning

Motivation, at least as far as education and training are concerned, can be considered as one of those factors that generate and direct goal oriented behaviours. Motivation is often perceived as a driving force which compels an individual (a learner, in this instance) to act in certain ways.

It is useful to discuss motivation as it relates to the learner and her/his learning needs, but it is also important to consider the place of motivation within the learning episode. Initial motivation may not carry all the way through a devised learning program, teachers need to consider new ways of regenerating motivation - incentives, recognition and rewards may at times be helpful. Certainly learner success and satisfaction reinforce learning and motivate further learning.

Voluntary participants in adult education are much more likely to be positively motivated, and participants are more likely to be positively motivated if learning is without perceived threat, (eg. work status, loss of esteem, lack of success) and when the content is centred on learner need. In identifying learning goals and needs, adult learners should be given encouragement and time to identify and set their goals and be assured they have opportunity to clarify and communicate those goals.

Further reading & references

ARIS, Language Australia houses a specialist collection of resources and journal articles on adult literacy, language and numeracy. The collection includes a number of texts specifically relating to adult learning. Some of the resources listed below were used in the development of this information sheet. All resources listed here are held in the ARIS collection.

Barer-Stein, Thelma and Draper, James A. (eds.), 1993 **The craft of teaching adults**, Culture Concepts Inc. 2nd ed. Toronto, Ontario

Brown, Ola M. (ed.), 1996 **Tips at your fingertips: teaching strategies for adult literacy tutors** International Reading Association (IRA) Newark, Delaware, US

Burns, Robert, 1995. **The adult learner at work: a comprehensive guide to the context, psychology and methods of learning for the workplace** Business and Professional Publishing Warriewood, NSW

Courtenay, Sean, 1992. **Why adults learn : towards a theory of participation in adult education** Routledge London

Foley, Griff (ed.), 1995. **Understanding adult education and training** Allen and Unwin St. Leonards, NSW

Kidd, J. R. 1978 **How Adults Learn** Prentice-Hall New Jersey

Little, David, McAllister, Jean and Priebe, Robert 1991. **Adult learning in vocational education** Deakin University Press Geelong, Vic.

Mackeracher, Dorothy, 1996. **Making sense of adult learning**, Culture Concepts Toronto, Ontario

McCormack, R. and Pancini, G. 1991. **Learning to learn: introducing adults to the culture, context and conventions of knowledge: a guide for teachers** Victoria, Division of Further Education Melbourne

Merriam, Sharan B. and Caffarella, R. S. 1991. **Learning in adulthood: a comprehensive guide** Jossey-Bass Publishers San Francisco

Norrish, Dilys, 1994. **Learning about learning** Adult Literacy Information Office (ALIO), Western Sydney Institute of TAFE, Ashfield, NSW

Smith, Robert M. and others, 1990. **Learning to learn across the life span** Jossey-Bass Publishers San Francisco

Rogers, Alan , 1996. **Teaching adults** Open University Press 2nd ed. Buckingham, UK

How to access these resources

ARIS, Language Australia houses a specialist collection of resources and journal articles on adult literacy, language and numeracy. All resources and readings listed in this bibliography are held in the ARIS collection.

You can access the resources by visiting ARIS, Language Australia at:

Level 2,
255 William Street,
Melbourne 3000.
Phone: 03 9926 4779
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Postal address:
GPO Box 372F,
Melbourne Vic 3001.
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